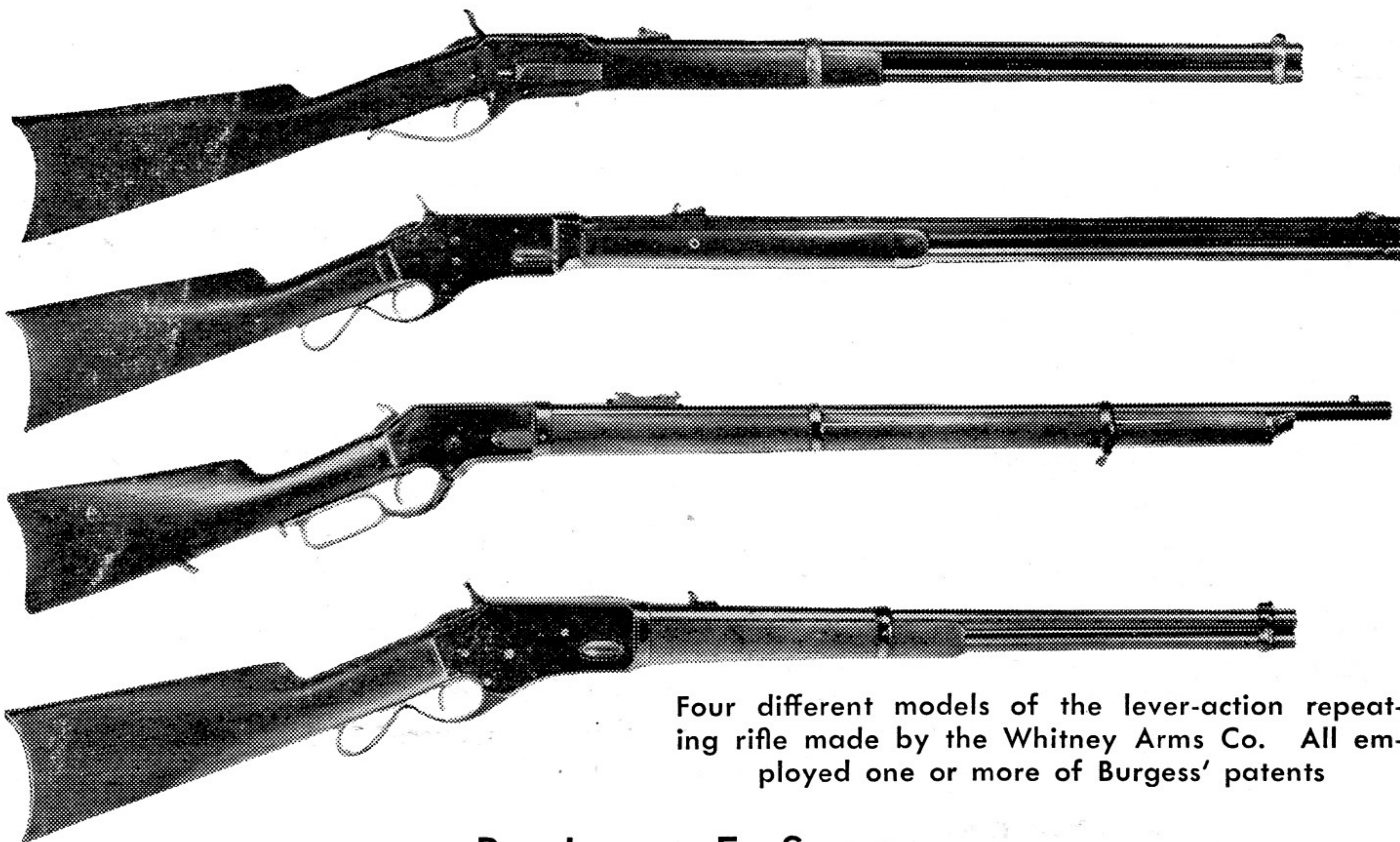


Andrew Burgess

# ANDREW BURGESS

## Firearms Inventor



Four different models of the lever-action repeating rifle made by the Whitney Arms Co. All employed one or more of Burgess' patents

By James E. Serven

**T**HEODORE Roosevelt sat at his desk as president of the police board of New York City (1895-1896). A slightly-built man entered and Teddy looked up.

Teddy's visitor suddenly opened his coat and whipped out an odd gun. He snapped the hinged barrel into place and the roar of six shots echoed through the building.

The shells were blanks and this burst of firing was a typical dramatic demonstration of Andrew Burgess' folding riot gun! Here was one of over 600 inventions credited to Andrew Burgess, a man whose mind seemed to be a constantly flowing spring of sparkling ideas.

Andrew Burgess' role was primarily that of a 'man behind the scenes', for most of his inventions found their way into the hands of prominent manufacturers who used their own names in marketing the finished products. Hence little credit came to Burgess.

### Firearms inventor of stature

It is doubtful that anyone will ever surpass the late John Browning's prominence as an inventor of firearms, but the record undeniably reveals that one of the few men ever to approach Browning's stature was Andrew Burgess. I have personally studied the drawings and specifications of 81 Burgess firearms patents, dating from 1871 to 1903. In these patents are found vital principles used by many arms manufacturers in the latter decades of the 19th century.

Before we enter into the story of Andrew Burgess' many firearms, let's first get some idea of his general background. The name itself is an Americanized spelling of the German 'Burgus'. Andrew's grandfather, John Burgus, had been a Hessian soldier who, after being convinced that the Colonists were in the right, went over to the American side.

Andrew was born in Dresden, New York, on January 16, 1837. The family

later moved near Owego, where Andrew eventually set up his workshop and whence came the majority of Burgess patents. Among Andrew's boyhood friends were Robert Green Ingersoll, later to become a prominent writer and orator, and Matthew B. Brady, the great photographer of the Civil War era.

When the Civil War came along, Andrew Burgess accompanied Brady as an assistant. They traveled with the Union Army, and largely through their efforts very excellent photographic records of that conflict, including many battle scenes, have been preserved.

### Later operated own studio

The interest in photography never quite died out, in spite of Burgess' overwhelming zeal for firearms. In 1874 and 1875 he operated the National Photographic Art Gallery at 627 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C., having bought out the Matthew Brady business there.

Many years later, in an old barn at Owego, George L. Andrews uncovered a number of important Brady and Burgess photographic plates. These had come into Mr. Andrews' possession by inheritance. Through the kindness of Mr. Andrews, additional light has been thrown on Burgess family history, for Mr. Andrews and his father were the attorneys and close friends of Andrew Burgess and his wife, Eudora Tiffany Burgess, a beautiful and talented mem-

ber of a well-known New York family.

It is recorded that Burgess worked for a time at New Haven, where Winchester, Whitney, and Marlin were close at hand; at Hartford, which was the given address for one of his firearms patents; at New York City, Buffalo, and St. Augustine, Florida. At Owego, however, was the principal workshop wherein Burgess' ideas took form.

They say that those people who are endowed with a streak of genius think and act differently from the rest of us. This was true in some respects with Andrew Burgess. Who else ever fitted out a floating workshop! Yes, Burgess bought two houses in St. Augustine, Florida, where he spent the winters in his later years. Then he bought a boat and proceeded to fit it up as a trim and complete workshop. Mornings he would chug out to a lonely anchorage where he could work with absolute concentration, and in the late afternoon he would head back home.

Andrew Burgess was a cultured and considerate man. He was very fond of playing the violin. It may be that he carried along his fiddle on those boat trips and did his practicing out where the neighbors could not be disturbed!

### Best known for repeating shotgun

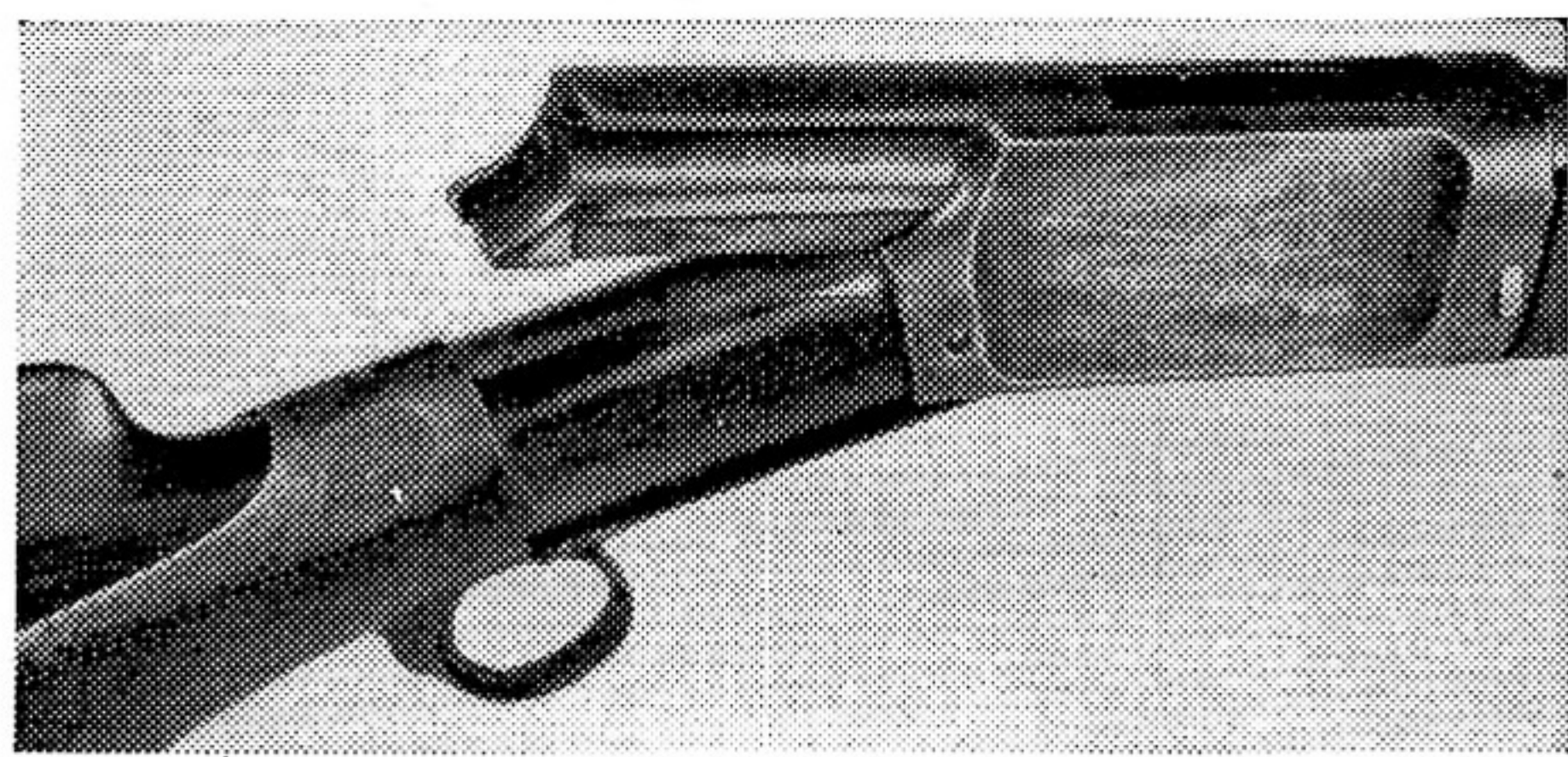
Probably the best known of Burgess' inventions is the slide-action repeating shotgun manufactured at Buffalo, New York, between 1893 and 1899. I would

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not say, however, that these guns were his most important contribution to armsmaking history. At any rate, Burgess' patent slide-action guns are the most clearly associated with Burgess, for they were made at last under Burgess' own name—by the Burgess Gun Company.

Before me as I write this are some of the old Burgess Company catalogs, and several folders issued by that company. In trying to get the first catalog ready, an appended note indicates, some 'defective copy' reached the printer. But this catalog is quite interesting nonetheless. It states that, "Mr. Burgess has heretofore given to the world abundant evidence of his skill, and among the claims in his nearly six hundred patents,



Sliding pistol grip of the Burgess repeating shotgun

the Kennedy, Marlin, Colt, Hotchkiss, Schulhof, Mannlicher, etc., may be noted as some of the steps by which his later results have been reached."

Burgess' reputation was world-wide. As early as 1881, the famous English author and arms expert, W. W. Greener, stated: "Mr. A. Burgess of Owego, N. Y., is a prolific inventor of fixings to magazine arms and more than one arm owes its production to his genius".

During the life of the Burgess Gun Company, before it was purchased by Winchester in 1899, only shotguns were offered. The catalogs stated, however, that the manufacture of a sporting rifle, a repeating automatic pistol, and military arms were contemplated.

#### Has sliding pistol grip

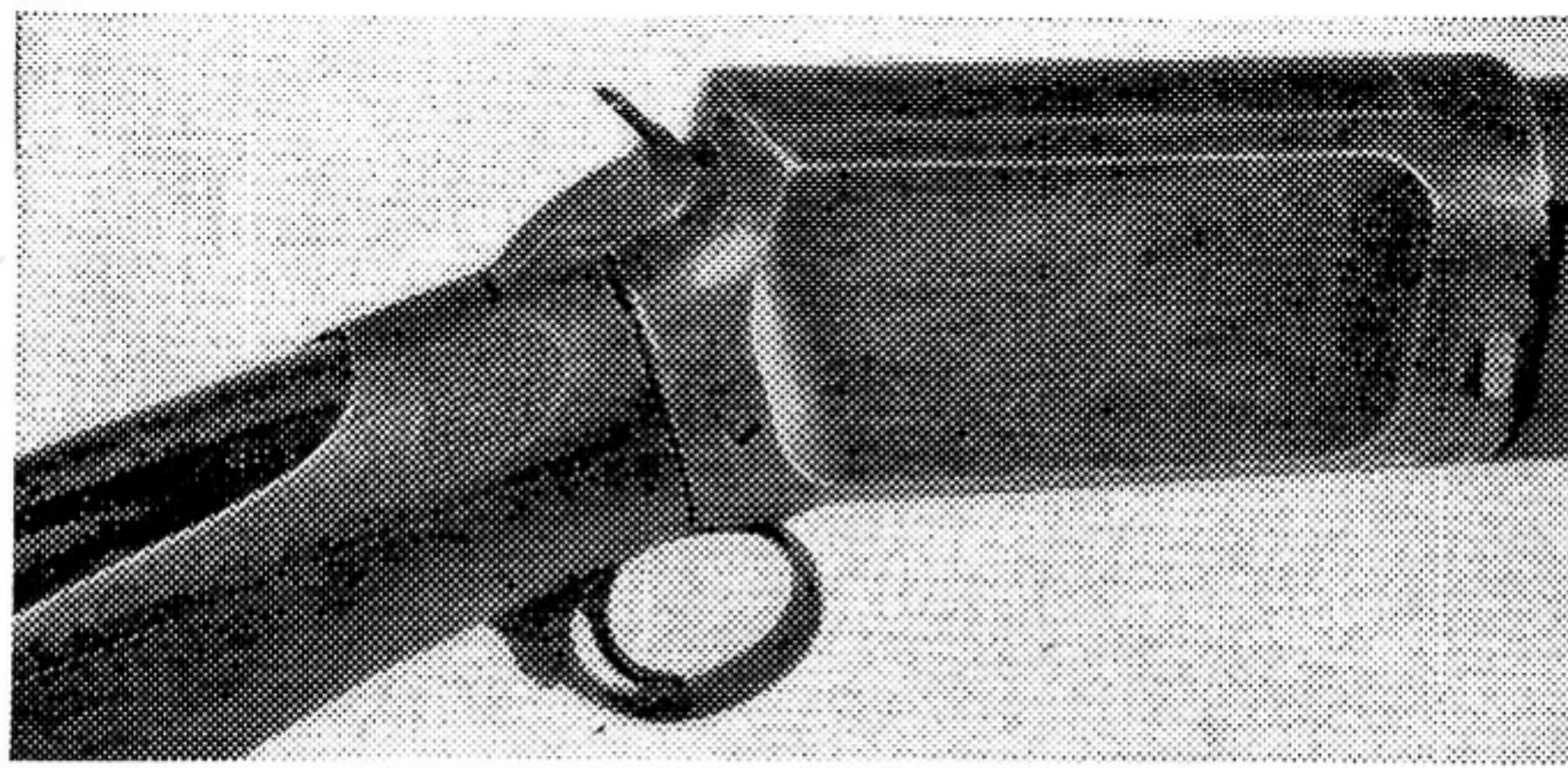
The Burgess repeating shotgun has an action unlike that of any other. Its sliding pistol-grip movement consists of a sleeve around the neck of the stock, a generous pistol grip, trigger, and trigger guard. The entire pistol grip assembly moves backward and forward, and it works the action in a remarkably smooth manner.

Burgess claimed the gun was semi-automatic due to a shooter's natural reactions after the recoil. It is said that six shots could be fired in three seconds.

Barrels were quickly detachable through a system of interrupted threads, and could be had in Damascus or steel, of varying weights and lengths, and with bores as required. Prices for the guns varied from \$200 to \$40, depending on

grades, which were listed from AA down to D. Weight overall varied from 6½ to eight pounds.

The Burgess folding riot gun, mentioned earlier, was designed for police service, express messengers, prisons, banks, etc. At 40 yards, loaded with buckshot, it gave a spread of three feet with strong penetration. When folded, it could be carried under the coat in a leather holster. The breech mechanism was the same as other Burgess shotguns, but, in place of a separable joint for attaching the 20-inch barrel to the frame, a slip hinge allowed the gun to be carried folded, and loaded in magazine and barrel. A quick snap, and the barrel swung into place, locked, and was ready for firing.



An old newspaper article dated June 30, 1895, by Harry C. Palmer, gives us a review of the merits of shotguns of that day. In Palmer's opinion, the Winchester, Burgess, and Ostrander were the finest shotguns then produced.

Very complimentary comments on Burgess guns appeared in *The American Field*, and in testimonials from many sources. The gun truly had considerable merit, even by present-day standards, and I know some men who are still shooting their old slide-action Burgess shotguns.

#### "A very peculiar sensation"

Among prominent shooters in the 1890's were C. D. Damon and E. A. Brininstool. Both these men entered the employ of the Burgess Gun Company. Equipped with cut-away 'demonstrator' guns, they traveled throughout the country giving shooting exhibitions and demonstrating the features of Burgess guns. Their travels are recorded by reports in *Shooting and Fishing* and other magazines. These comments by one shooter are rather interesting: "After witnessing the shooting of Mr. Damon, I was interested to try the gun myself. There is a very peculiar sensation in firing the gun for the first time. On pressing the trigger the sleeve around the grip with trigger and trigger guard slides back. The sensation is that the gun has come apart, but a few shots quickly accustoms one to the peculiar action, and before he is aware of it the motion seems a perfectly natural one."

The late E. A. Brininstool moved to California about the turn of the century and it was my privilege to know him very well. He made a national reputation with his writings, and was especially noted for his books on the Custer battle. Among Mr. Brininstool's recollections of the days with Burgess was the manufacture and testing of a special gun order from India.

Mr. Brininstool often served as tester and inspector. A man named Knouse was the model maker. It seemed that an Indian rajah wanted a gun suitable for elephant shooting. The Burgess Company had never made anything like that before. However, they set about designing an 'elephant gun'. Finally the gun was ready and came to Brininstool for firing. It was designed to take shells holding four or 4½ drams of black-powder with a cardboard wad and two blackedge wads over the powder. The 12-gauge ball was then seated on top and melted wax poured around it to keep the ball in place.

#### Winchester bought company

Good groups were shot at 40 yards, and the ball would pass through a 12-inch stick of pine lumber at 35 feet. This seemed like bad news for the elephants in India, but Winchester bought out the Burgess Gun Company before the elephant gun business could be developed!

When Winchester bought the physical assets of the Burgess Gun Company, they also obtained the 13 important patents applicable to the gun, and the Burgess thenceforth became merely a memory, as had the Spencer, Whitney, and other systems absorbed by Winchester.

Now perhaps we may turn from Burgess' best known gun, the slide-action shotgun, back to the beginning of his inventive efforts, and learn how he became one of the world's foremost developers of the magazine rifle.

Andrew Burgess was married in 1871. A short time later one of his designs for a lever-action rifle was patented. This was one of the most significant accomplishments of his career, for on the qualities of this patent the first truly Burgess-designed guns were made.

The Whitney Arms Company was much impressed with the Burgess system, and made agreeable arrangements with Burgess for the manufacture of rifles on the principles set forth in Burgess' January 7, 1873, patent. But all this did not happen until 1879, after Burgess had had some lean years, and had tried to keep his head above water financially by operating the photo gallery in Washington, D. C., in 1874 and 1875.



Although Burgess patents cover bolt-action guns, gas-operated systems, trombone-action guns, unusual pistol systems, and of course the odd pistol-grip actions for the Burgess Gun Company shotguns, the preponderance of his efforts were devoted to improvements on the lever-action rifle.

For contemporary opinion on the Burgess system as employed by Whitney, I will quote from *American Inventions* by Brigadier General Charles B. Norton, published in 1882: "The Burgess is a repeating or magazine rifle with the magazine placed under the barrel, and is operated by a lever, the backward and forward movement of which cocks the hammer, opens the breech, throws out the empty shell, and brings a new cartridge into place, ready for discharge. . . . It has fewer parts than any other magazine rifle operated by a lever. . . . It is safe and easily manipulated. . . . It has been thoroughly tested by firing many hundreds of rounds and has stood every test. . . . It meets a want long felt."

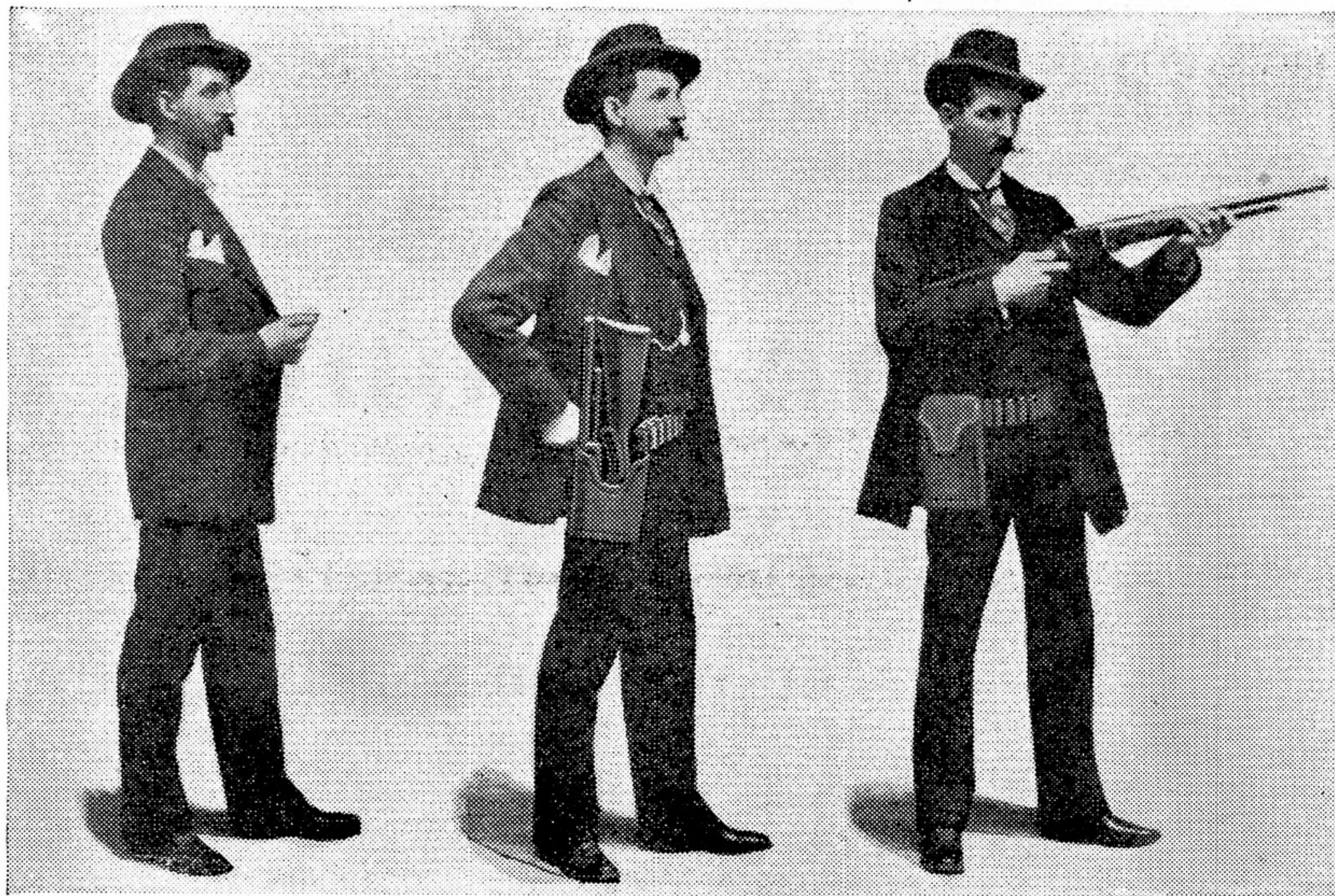
Three variations of the Whitney-Burgess 1879 model were offered by the Whitney Arms Company, a sporting model with 28-inch barrel, holding nine cartridges, a carbine with 22-inch barrel, holding seven cartridges, and a military model with 33-inch barrel, and holding 11 cartridges. All were .45-70 caliber. Later other models and calibers were available.

#### Patents used by many armsmakers

Just how many different patents went into the various Whitney Arms during Andrew Burgess' association with them is not accurately known. After Winchester purchased the Whitney Arms Company early in 1888, no more lever-action guns of the Whitney patterns were produced.

Working diligently in his shop at Tioga, just outside Owego, New York, Andrew Burgess kept in close touch with the arms manufacturers along the Connecticut River, at New Haven and Hartford. Here was the hub of American arms manufacturing.

John M. Marlin, long prominent in the production of Ballard single-shot



An early catalog illustration of the Burgess folding riot gun

rifles, saw the handwriting on the wall and became vitally interested in repeating magazine rifles. On December 13, 1881, we find patent No. 250,825 issued in the names of J. M. Marlin and A. Burgess. Thus Andrew Burgess had his foot in another door, and guns of his design began to come from the Marlin shop.

Soon afterward, the Colt Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company of Hartford, aware of the increasing popularity of lever-action magazine rifles, called in the man they thought best able to provide them with a successful design—Andrew Burgess.

Thus it came about that in 1883 the Colt Company brought out their Colt-Burgess lever-action .44-40 rifle. This gun employed various patents, from Burgess' January 7, 1873, patent up to 1882.

But here again the colossal shadow of Winchester darkened Burgess' path. To quote from Harold F. Williamson's excellent book *Winchester—The Gun That Won The West*: "In external appearance this gun (the Colt-Burgess) was almost identical to the Winchester '73 and its action was equal if not superior to that arm." Winchester was worried. Burgess patents had become an increasingly sharp thorn in their side.

It is said that at a conference between the Colt and Winchester Companies,

Winchester indicated they would enter the pistol business if Colt did not abandon the manufacture of lever-action rifles. Colt decided they didn't want Winchester in the pistol business and the curtain came down on another Burgess rifle—through no fault of the gun itself.

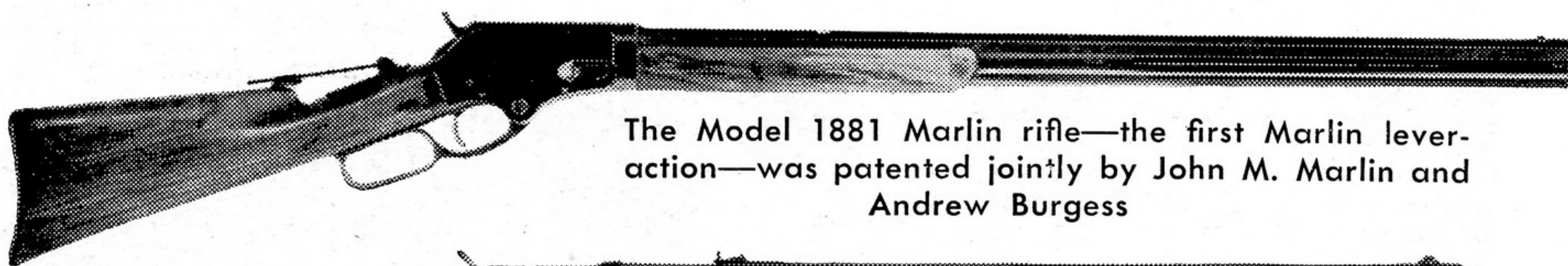
Even though Winchester seemed to gobble up Burgess' ideas and relegate them to an archive shelf in the course of promoting their own models, you may be certain that the Burgess patents were closely studied by Winchester experts and many of Burgess' principles were employed to build better Winchester guns as time went by.

#### Developed many useful ideas

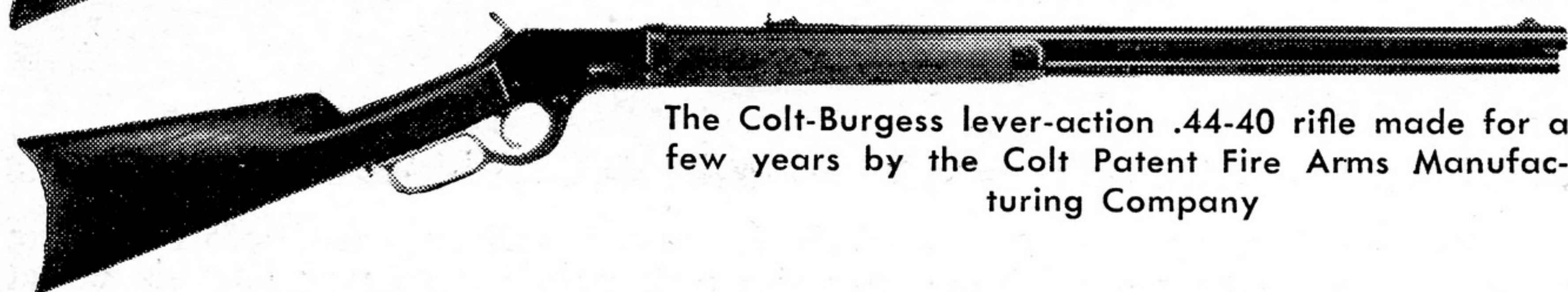
Andrew Burgess, alternately working and dreaming in his upper New York shop, or during the winters at his Florida work bench, developed many truly useful ideas. His skill was deeply respected by those few familiar with his work. But Andrew Burgess was destined to work behind the scenes. It was for him to create, and for others to reap the acclaim.

Few men have had more disappointments and out-and-out hard luck. It did not discourage or sour Andrew Burgess. He kept plugging away. There were hard times. Eventually the worth of Burgess' patents could not be denied and his widespread efforts earned him a modest fortune. The fame to which he was entitled, however, always eluded him. He died in 1908.

Considerable interesting information concerning Andrew Burgess has come across my desk in the preparation of this story, but a few words spoken by Elmer Burgess pleased me most of all. He said: "We all loved Uncle Andrew for his easy-going personality. He never seemed to meet a stranger".



The Model 1881 Marlin rifle—the first Marlin lever-action—was patented jointly by John M. Marlin and Andrew Burgess



The Colt-Burgess lever-action .44-40 rifle made for a few years by the Colt Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Company